A Practical Guide for Developing and Writing NATO Concepts

Part II: Developing and Assessing Future Concepts

Patrick Van Hoeserlande

The purpose of this part is to provide practical guidelines for developing and assessing future concepts, although many apply also to historical and current concepts.

Reasons for a New Concept

There are two possible reasons to start developing a new concept:

New military problem

A concept may be developed to propose a solution to a newly identified or an anticipated (future) military problem for which there is currently no adequate military solution. Some new combination of political, social, economic, technological, doctrinal or other factors may cause this new problem. New objectives in an existing situation may also lead to a new problem. For example, a situation itself may be unchanged, but political expectations may have increased, necessitating a new concept.

New solution to an existing military problem

A concept may be developed to propose a better solution than currently exists to an existing military problem. This better solution may be made possible by some technological, organizational, tactical, societal or other developments that did not exist previously, or it may be necessitated by the failure of an existing concept.

Future technological, organizational, tactical, societal or other developments may cause changes in existing solutions and, if not followed through, create a new military problem. Developing these kind of concepts may generate extra resistance as the current solution still has its validity and the new solution may not be realisable yet. However, waiting until the new development is mature enough to implement may result in a too slow (or worse, too late) adoption of the new possibilities.

Foundations of a Good Future Concept

A concept should be based on a serious contemplation of the subject of war. All concepts are based on certain beliefs about war, and the validity of a concept depends

on the soundness of those beliefs. A future concept may or may not address these principles directly, but it should at least be compatible with them or explain why it is not.

Historical awareness

A future concept should reflect an awareness of military history, even though it may propose a revolutionary departure from historical patterns. Useful future concepts are rarely derived from abstract theoretical premises, but instead are speculations about the future informed by the practical lessons of the past. History is the primary means by which we study and understand warfare. A concept that ignores history risks sacrificing credibility. Even worse is a concept that misuses history to support preconceived theories. A concept should reflect an understanding of its own evolution and antecedents.

Concept developers should resist the temptation to believe that the past offers little insight because the factors facing the current age are so unique. They rarely are.

Likewise, concept developers should resist the temptation to develop a concept that is viewed as "revolutionary" for the sake of being revolutionary. The desire for a revolutionary breakthrough does not make it possible. Favourable conditions must also exist and it is only through an understanding of history that one can know if they do. The overwhelming preponderance of change is evolutionary, but this does not make the change any less valuable. Evolutionary future concepts will be the norm. Unfounded claims of revolutionary breakthrough will damage the credibility of a concept.

None if this is meant to discourage concept developers from being ambitiously forward thinking, especially early in the concept development process when the objective is to explore possibilities. There is a difference between appreciating history and being a slave to it. On the contrary, history can help one understand how the world has changed. A true appreciation for history may help identify the emerging technological or other advancements that make dramatic improvements possible. Finally, an appreciation of history will provide a natural scepticism of faddish ideas that have not had to stand the test of time.

Consistent with the nature and theory of war

Underlying any future concept is a system of fundamental beliefs about the nature of war and the successful conduct of military action. These beliefs may be expressed explicitly in the concept, or they may be implicit, but in any event they establish the essential foundation of a future concept.

Some attributes of war may change, but others are immutable. A future concept must capture the attributes that are subject to change without violating the attributes that are not. In other words, a future concept must reflect the true nature and theory of war.[1]

War is essentially a clash between hostile, independent wills, each trying to impose itself on the other while denying the other its aims. The antagonists are not inanimate objects, but wilful intelligences which will spare no effort to confound the others' designs. These opposing wills are not monolithic forces, but highly adaptive complex

---

[1] Two classic authorities on the subject are Carl von Clausewitz' On War and Sun Tzu's The Art of War.

systems. The interaction between them unfolds in a fluid, time-driven dynamic of initiative and response and is characterized by friction, uncertainty, unpredictability, disorder, violence, surprise and random chance. Outcomes can be highly nonlinear (i.e., highly and unforeseeably disproportionate to inputs), and unintended consequences are commonplace. Under these conditions, war is a continuous and uncertain struggle to reconcile ends, ways and means. Quantifiable factors such as numerical superiority and attrition matter, but so do intangibles like surprise and boldness. War is fundamentally a creation of politics, economics and culture and will thus be impelled and restrained by these external forces. Military designs must be tied to higher objectives. A credible future concept reflects the phenomenon as it is rather than distorts the phenomenon to conform to the desires of the concept. If a concept contradicts the consistent experience of war, the burden is on the concept to make its case. In other words, if a concept professes to change the conduct of war so dramatically that the old "rules" do not apply, it is obligated to explain convincingly how.

Balance between military art and science

In order to qualify as a concept, a concept must encompass both military art and science as they apply within the parameters of the concept. From the classical period of history until the 17th century warfare was viewed mainly as an art best understood through historical study. The Scientific Revolution ushered in new and vastly different technologies and a different approach to war - that of science. For more than 300 years a tension has thus existed between military art and science.

Each has its proper and required role. A future concept should envision an appropriate balance between art and science; it may stress one or the other, but it should not ignore either.

With the growing dominance of science in nearly all aspects of human endeavour, the military profession has seen a more-or-less continuous tendency to shift this balance toward science by making an increasing part of warfare scientific. Developers of concepts should we be aware of this tendency because there are limits to the extent to which military operations can be turned into procedure. A concept that proposes a dramatic shift in the traditional balance between art and science (usually by proceduralizing an activity that has traditionally been viewed as belonging to art) should describe the factors that make the shift possible and desirable.

Embedded in the proper military-technological context

Most future concepts are designed to exploit new technologies or to respond to the proliferation of new technologies. Any such concept must understand those technologies. It must comprehend the military-technological context within which it is meant to apply. It is not the primary purpose of a concept to envision new technologies, but to envision new ways of operating with technologies that are likely to exist. A concept must not assume the existence of technologies that are unlikely within the future time horizon of the concept. A concept that does this is fantasy, and not the proper basis for the combat development process.

Conversely, a concept must not ignore the existence of technologies that will likely be in use within the time horizon of the concept. A concept that does envision a technology breakthrough must also strive to envision the resulting countermeasures, which may take the form of new operating methods or new technologies themselves,

that are likely to emerge in response to the breakthrough, since no innovation has been introduced that did not generate counter-innovations to mitigate it. In envisioning an appropriate military-technological context, concept developers should remember that war is ultimately a clash between human wills and that the human dimension is therefore dominant. A future concept should be careful not to describe war as essentially an interaction between technologies. The principle of envisioning proper context applies not only to technology, but also to political, societal, cultural, economic and other factors.

Recognition of the general approach to war

A future NATO concept should be aware of general approach to war. This approach is an informal product of civil-military consensus built up over time rather than a formal policy. It is based on shared values and national experiences in war and is reinforced by strong cultural and institutional forces created by those values and experiences. Any future concept will be part of this larger cultural context and should be compatible with it. A future concept that ignores these factors is not likely to be acceptable to the military or the society.

As examples, in present form, the general approach emphasizes unity of command, significantly through deliberate, centralized planning with a political oversight. It features a general desire to minimize casualties and collateral damage on all sides. While some of these principles are more fundamental than others, it is important to recognize that all of them are conditional. A new concept does not by definition propose essential changes to the manner of war. In fact, many new concepts are simply examples of the current approach taken to the next level by enabling technologies. The point is merely that any concept that ignores the way of war and the factors that influence it is not likely to be accepted.

The third and last article answers the question: "What topics should a good concept address?"